

# Eghosa E. Osaghae, Ebere Onwudiwe and Rotimi T. Suberu, eds., 2002, *The Nigerian Civil War and its Aftermath*

A review by Sanya Osha

*The Nigerian Civil War and its Aftermath* eds.  
Eghosa E. Osaghae, Ebere Onwudiwe and  
Rotimi T. Suberu, Ibadan: PEFS and John  
Archers, 2001.

The anguish, anger and frustrations caused by the Nigerian civil war (1967-1970) are very much present within the current Nigerian sociopolitical milieu. This view was evident during most of the sessions of the international conference on the Nigerian Civil War and its Aftermath organized by the Programme on Ethnic and Federal Studies (PEFS), University of Ibadan in September 2001. Some of the papers of the conference have now being published in a book that is the subject of this review.

General Yakubu Gowon, (rtd.), the Nigerian military ruler who was saddled with the task of persecuting the war gave the keynote address at the conference. The late Lt. Col. Philip Effiong (rtd.), the rebel leader whose place it was in history to surrender on behalf of the Biafran side was also present. Judging from some of the chapters of the book, *The Nigerian Civil War and its Aftermath*, there is still a considerable degree of suppressed anger and bitterness formed along ethnic lines. Ethnicity within the context of the discourse of the Nigerian civil war is often elevated to the level of mythology in which real theoretical reflection recedes and metaphysical immersion becomes more or less the order of things.

General Yakubu Gowon's view is just one of the typical strands of the narratives of nationhood and also one that supports the hegemonic discourse regarding the war. He now downplays the importance of the Aburi Accord in which he played a very prominent role. In addition, Gowon views the expression, "the Nigerian Civil War" a misnomer, in other words, an unhappy term that was coined and imposed on Nigerians by "political commentators." On the contrary, he prefers terms such "police action," "military action," and "full military action." Other officially approved terminologies include the so-called "no victor, no vanquished" principle. Finally, it is Gowon's view that the wounds of the war have healed. Of course, nothing can be further from the truth.

Philip Effiong's stance on the war is markedly dissimilar from Gowon's. The book more than anything else, unmasks the hidden and more unsavory dimension of the war. In this regard, the plight of the numerous ethnic minorities that suffered as a result of the war needs to be more fully studied. We need to revisit the many allegations of needless and unreported brutality by the Nigerian federal troops on largely unarmed civilians. For instance, Professor Stanley Okafor's chapter, "The Nigerian Army and the "Liberation" of Asaba: A Personal Narrative," is a moving account of the ordeal of the indigenes of Asaba. From his account, it can be argued that the federal troops carried out a deliberate and heinous policy of genocide in the area. Okafor claims that there are mass graves littered all over Asaba. If this is the case, then perhaps the contemporary discourse on truth and reconciliation can be applied here. Furthermore, it goes on to demonstrate that several expanses of recent Nigerian history remain unreconciled. Judging from the competing views of the war, Gowon's account becomes a bland typification of the official stance on it. Within the general thrust of the book, there is the implied suggestion that we need a multi-layered deconstruction of the official stance in order to include marginal but important views of the war.

Some of the chapters possess the required degree of scholarly gravity and authority. For instance, Adigun Agbaje's chapter, "The War and the Nigerian State," tries to set itself above the fractiousness, lack of distanciation and passion that characterise the debates on the war. Ac-

ording to him,

“the Nigerian state, and access to it, came to be perceived in ethnic-regional and religious terms. The idea of a technocratic, rational, objective state literally disappeared in the heat of passion and thereafter, creating in the popular mind a hierarchy of citizenship got defined by ethnic regional, religious and allied affiliations” (p.27).

More decisively, he concludes that

“more three decades after the war ended, national unity remains on the agenda for the future, and agitations for self-determination by many groups across the country have become part of political landscape” (p. 29).

Adigun’s chapter is clearly a sustained piece of discursive distancing. The same may be said of Irene Pogonson’s chapter which probes the international dimensions of the war. Hers is a fairly long chapter which also traces the evolution and maturation of the national foreign policy initiatives before and after the war. Ebere Onwudiwe’s chapter, “International Reactions to the Nigerian Civil War” is also a highly informative effort. The level of research attained is quite commendable as Onwudiwe is able to incorporate a lot of recently declassified material by the security agencies of the United States into his chapter. Through the correspondence of different security operatives, we see how the major foreign policy decisions were made by the United States and also the United Kingdom. Such declassified information displays the vagaries and intricacies of international relations.

On the other hand, the late M.C. K. Ajuluchuku’s chapter is a bit of a let down given his usual brilliance as it is a mere rehash of undifferentiated ethnic chauvinism and poorly assembled intellectual material. Indeed, we require more balanced analyses of the marginalisation of the Igbo than Ajuluchuku presents.

The kind of critique one has in mind is evident in Ime Ikiddeh’s account of the Ibibio experience of the war which nudges us to reconsider another important dimension to the war. While some starved and endured the worst of privations, others engaged in gratuitous merry-making. Thus the impacts and effects of the war were varied and uneven throughout the country. However, an important ethnic viewpoint is left out of the book even though it was copiously entertained during the conference from

which the book emerged. During the conference, Uyi Usuanlele gave an account of the Benin experience in which he employs a large body of historical material to illustrate how the political fortunes of the Mid-West took shape not only in relation to the Igbo but also within the context of the Nigerian federation. He argues that mainstream academic historical discourse was manipulated to denigrate the achievements of the Old Benin kingdom in favour of the Igbo. Unfortunately, this account is not included in the book.

Wale Adebani, Nosa Owens-Ibie and Ayo Olukotun examine how the media have been a major factor in shaping the various discursive fortunes of the war. Remy Oriaku, on the other hand, analyses a significant part of the huge body of creative literature produced on account of the war.

The book demonstrates that Nigerians have not fully imbibed the lessons of the war. Also, more work needs to be done regarding the competing narratives on the war and the strategies for the critical reception of them. Ethnonationalism still rages in the sore and raw streets of Nigeria and this makes the civil war an importance locus for collective self-examination. The book reflects the multiple frustrations of Nigerians on the question of national unity and the ways in which political and ethnic chauvinisms together with various kinds of political fundamentalisms are addressed. The fragile unity of the country is evident in the renewed and intricate struggles over resource control in the Niger Delta and the prevarications of current Olusegun Obasanjo administration over the matter. There is definitely a lot to be learned from the civil war and the book points out many potential areas for further research.